

Second Sunday after Christmas

Sermon Text: Ephesians 1:3-14

Theme: *“The guarantee of our inheritance”*

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

We are here at the beginning of a new year, a new decade, and a new day. All things are new once more, with all of the excitement and possibilities this opens up. I was reflecting on the new things we had bought and received as Christmas gifts as a family. Many of these gifts come with a warranty or guarantee. They are guaranteed to work as they are advertised for a specified time or else they will be repaired or replaced.

God has given us His guarantee that Paul describes in today’s second reading. “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.” (Eph 1:13-14)

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

Jesus, born to work for us

As we consider the new year, John’s gospel also begins with a new beginning. But rather than a new year, John’s introduction echoes the opening words of Genesis, “In the beginning...” Then John goes on to describe Jesus as the Word, the one who has always existed, together with the Father. It was the work of the Triune God that brought all of creation into existence and as John records Jesus’ words in Revelation, “I am the Alpha and the Omega”. As part of the Trinity, Jesus has always existed and he will endure forever. That’s good news if you want something stable in which to put your trust.

Whilst we might recognize this as good news, John’s gospel tells us that as Jesus came into the world, the people did not recognize him for who he really was. They did not recognize him as the Son of God, just the son of Joseph and Mary. And so because they didn’t recognize him, they didn’t receive Jesus or his divinity. Here John is describing the corporate reaction to Jesus and his saving work. The world as a whole didn’t recognize or receive him, nor does the world as a whole receive Jesus today. Australia should no longer call itself a Christian country. In fact if someone were to describe it as such in the media, there would be a great hue and cry from many people in the community who place their faith in any other god other than the Triune God. So the situation facing John at the time he wrote his gospel is much the same for us today.

But then John moves from the corporate community to the individual level. “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn 1:12-13). John is recognizing that while the community may not have recognized Jesus, many individuals did acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God and so are remarkably described as being born of God, not of human parentage. John is placing the birth of Christian people in the same light as Jesus’ miraculous birth that came about because of God’s will, not that of Joseph and/or Mary.

And whilst John moves from the corporate to the individual, again in Australia we can do the same. If Australia is no longer a Christian community, many individuals are still worshipping the Trinity and still believe in Jesus’ name. If just 10% of Australians worship in Christian churches on a regular basis, that means we have about two million people worshipping God each week. There is no other event, certainly none on a regular basis that attracts such a crowd. The church is a long way from being finished here just yet.

So as individuals, you recognize Jesus and put your trust in him whose work was to win for us an inheritance. Jesus’ work is our guarantee that our Heavenly Father is pleased with us, not for our sake but for Jesus’ sake.

God chooses us

Now you have heard me describe in the past how although we as people are bound by time and space, God’s time is eternal. This means that God has known from before the beginning of time how things will play out. He knows who will put their trust in him and who will not recognize him. Whilst he knows this, we don’t and so our work continues.

If God does know the plan for each one of us, it means he has chosen us. Paul says, “he chose us in him (Jesus) before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph 1:4). But here we need to be careful that we don’t stray into the area of what is called ‘double-predestination’. This is to suggest that if God chose some people to be saved, surely this means some people have been chosen for condemnation. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Jesus Christ died for the sins of all people. Here we have salvation at a corporate level. Salvation is freely available for all people. But the problem is that many people don’t recognise this salvation already won for them, so they try to win for themselves their own salvation. Hence the great work many people go to accumulating good possessions and experiences. They have fooled themselves into thinking that if they could just acquire a little bit more, then they will be secure and happy. But if some people are busy trying to work out their own salvation, the other problem is that many people today don’t even realise they are in trouble – and so they continue on the life journey they have mapped out for themselves, ignoring God’s plan of salvation.

But this is not the story for all people. Indeed many people who recognize Jesus, put their trust in God’s plan of salvation. They have been called by the Holy Spirit and they confess their faith in God’s work which was completed by Jesus on the cross. This is the work Jesus was born to do and it is to that cross our sins are nailed and we therefore walk free.

Live life, firm in your guarantee

Jesus’ work is complete and the fact that you are here today, that you confess your faith in the Triune God and that you receive God’s forgiveness through his absolution and through the Lord’s Supper means that He has already chosen you for salvation. Of that there can be no doubt. You don’t need to guess whether you are saved. If someone were to ask you the old question, “If you were to die today, would God let you into heaven?”, you don’t need to hesitate. The answer is not, “I hope so”. It is simply, “YES!” It is yes because that is what God has promised. It is the promise by which you were sealed on the day you were baptised. You are God’s own child and you are predestined for salvation.

Now live as a child of God who has already been given this remarkable gift. We have all given and received many gifts over the past Christmas. Many of these gifts will come with a guarantee that they will perform as expected. But with gifts constructed with human hands, our guarantees always come with conditions. You have to keep the receipt; there is a time limit; the product must not be misused; you have to send back to the factory for assessment; and the list goes on.

But even with all of the conditions, why do we value the guarantee? Because it gives us assurance that if we use the item as intended and something does go wrong, we have a guarantee that things will be put to right. Imagine if you were given something and you were too afraid to use it in case it broke. Or you might be saving something for a special day. If you never used the thing you were given, you may as well not ever have it in the first place. There is a story of a woman whose husband bought her some beautiful lingerie for a special birthday or anniversary. She loved the lace and the colour so much she knew it had to be worn for a very special occasion. Even when her husband asked why she hadn’t worn it, she always told him it was so special, on the best occasion would do. Unfortunately the woman took ill and died unexpectedly. Her husband unfolded the beautiful lingerie and took it to the funeral director for his wife to wear. Friends, use the gifts you have been given now. Don’t wait for ‘the right time’ or a special occasion. There’s every chance God has given them to you to use because now is the time.

If this is true of things, how much more so is it true for your faith? Use your faith. Walk through your life trusting that God has things in hand for you not matter what the circumstances may appear. Be prepared to give account for the faith you have because the person you share the reason for your hope may be another person whom God has chosen for salvation, they just don’t know it yet.

Friends, you have already been given the most wonderful inheritance from God himself. You were given this because of what Jesus has done for you and this has been sealed with the promised Holy Spirit that was poured into you when you were baptised. Live out your faith as God’s guaranteed gift to you.

Amen.